

## Empty Iridescent Spheres. Notes on the Metaphysics of Light in Indian and Tibetan Buddhist Tantric Sources

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**O**ne of the features of the second dissemination of Buddhist teachings in Tibet, after the eleventh century, was the emergence of a new esoteric religious literature with a progressive development of yogic practices and ideas that considered light as an essential principle. Over time, a metaphysics of light took form that strongly characterized yogic theory and praxis. Light was seen as the fundamental structural component of the whole universe, from both a cosmological and ontological point of view. In particular, I refer to the doctrines of the Indian *Kālacakra-tantra* system, to the Tibetan Rnying ma heterodox corpus known as Heart Essence (*Snying thig*) and to the ensuing *Zhang zhung snyan rgyud* literature of the Bon tradition.<sup>1</sup>

By using the definition “metaphysics of light”, I am aware that this expression was coined in 1916 by the German philosopher Clemens Baeumker (1853–1924), in his analysis of medieval Latin philosophical and religious thought.<sup>2</sup> Robert Grossetest (ca.1168–1253) was the most interesting representative of this philosophy. He was deeply influenced by St. Augustine, whose thought permeates his writings and from whom he drew a Neoplatonic outlook, but he was also one of the first to make extensive use of the Latin translations of Greek and Arabic philosophical and scientific writings, notably by Aristotle, Avicenna and Averroes.<sup>3</sup>

Although I am not launching into a project of comparative study of philosophical and religious experience, I should like to

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<sup>1</sup> I shall not deal here with Bon po Rdzogs chen literature, a theme I hope to take up in future studies.

<sup>2</sup> See Baeumker 1908: 358 et seq.

<sup>3</sup> Among the different studies on Robert Grossetest see McEvoy 2000; Panti 2017; Hendrix 2010. See also <https://grossetestesociety.org/about/>, accessed 15/04/2022.

draw a line between these two medieval worlds, at least in providing the definition of the religious phenomena we shall be reflecting upon.

*The Kālacakratantra tradition*

The *Kālacakratantra* (KCT) literature, as is well known, represents the last phase of Indian esoteric Buddhism. It emerged in India at the beginning of the 11th century and was transferred straightaway to Tibet by Indian Paṇḍitas, namely Somanātha, Samantaśrī, Śrī Bhadrabodhi, Viśvaśrī, etc.<sup>4</sup>

These authors, together with several Tibetan *lo tsā ba*, such as 'Bro dge slong Shes rab grags, Rwa Chos rab, Gyi yo Zla ba'i 'Od zer, etc., translated a vast corpus of KCT texts that are now preserved in the *Bka' 'gyur* and *Bstan 'gyur* collections.

The core instruction of the KCT system consists in the practice of the *ṣaḍaṅgayoga* (sixfold yoga), during the *utpattikrama* process, which leads the yogin to attain ultimate reality, the realisation of the *Mahāmudrā*: radiant, blissful and immutable wisdom.

*Ṣaḍaṅgayoga* is also a widespread practice in many Indian schools, both Hindu and Buddhist. The names of the six auxiliaries are very ancient and have been handed down over several centuries, starting from the *Maitrī Upaniṣad* (VI, 18).<sup>5</sup> In the course of time they have assumed different meanings, according to the different traditions. In India it cannot be considered a unitary coherent doctrine, since each of the six auxiliaries is explained and practised in various ways in the different Indian traditions, such as the Kashmirian Advaita Śaiva tradition, the Vaiṣṇava tradition, the later Gorakṣaśataka yoga traditions and others.<sup>6</sup>

The first Buddhist esoteric text in which we find a detailed analysis of the *ṣaḍaṅgayoga* is the *Guhyasamājottara*, the 18th chapter of the *Guhyasamājatantra* (GST) representing a synthesis of the GST doctrines.

Later it was adopted in the KCT practice with a different formulation, in which the visionary elements became very important. This new "visionary" formulation was the nucleus of the doctrine of the so-called Transcendent (or Alternative) KCT, within a tradition that enacts a threefold division of the KCT: Outer, Inner and

<sup>4</sup> On the history of the KCT and its diffusion in Tibet see: Newman 1987a; Newman 1987b; Newman 2021; Orofino 1994a: 11-30; Gnoli, Orofino 1995: 13-103; Wallace 2001: 3-30.

<sup>5</sup> See Cowell 1935: 129-136.

<sup>6</sup> See Grönbold 1996: 3-17; Mallinson, Singleton 2017: 7-11; Sferra 2000: 11-50.

Transcendent.<sup>7</sup>

The earliest and most important text of the *KCT* literary corpus, where we find this new formulation is the *Sekoddeśa* (*SU*), in 174 strophes. According to the tradition, it is the longest fragment of the *Paramādibuddha*, or the *Mūlakālacakratantra*, the root tantra of the Kālacakra school, believed to consist of 12,000 verses that were lost in Sanskrit and were not translated into Tibetan. Although only the first leaf of the *SU* manuscript is preserved in Sanskrit, we have two very different Tibetan translations of the entire text, dating back to the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century: one by the Kashmiri Paṇḍita Somanātha and the Tibetan *lo tsā ba* 'Bro Dge slong Shes rab grags (text A), the other by the Nepalese Paṇḍita Samantaśrī and the Tibetan *lo tsā ba* Rwa Chos rab (text B).<sup>8</sup>

This new formulation also emerges in two other very early treatises of the *KCT* tradition, the *Laghutantraṭīkā* by Vajrapāṇi (commentary to the *Cakrasaṃvaratantra*)<sup>9</sup> and the *Hevajrapañḍārthaṭīkā* by Vajragarbha (commentary to the *Hevajratāntra*).<sup>10</sup> These two texts, together with Puṇḍarīkā's *Vimalaprabhāṭīkā* (*VP*), the commentary to the *Laghukālacakratantra* (*LKCT*), an abridged version (*laghu*) of the *Paramādibuddha*, traditionally considered to consist of 1030 strophes still extant in Sanskrit and in its Tibetan translation, forming a body of integrated texts, known as the "Bodhisattva cycle" (*byang chub sems dpa'i skor*) or the "Bodhisattva commentaries corpus" (*byang chub se dpa'i 'grel pa rnams*), were fundamental to the spread of the *KCT* doctrines.

The *SU* was commented by Nāropā in his *Sekoddeśaṭīkā* (*SUṬ*) on the basis of the exegetical tradition of the Bodhisattva corpus.<sup>11</sup> It is the major authoritative commentary of the *SU* of the three extant in Sanskrit, the others being the *Sekoddeśaṭīppanī* by Sādhuputra Śrīdharānanda<sup>12</sup> and the short anonymous

<sup>7</sup> See the commentary by the 14th Dalai Lama, Rgyal ba Bstan 'dzin Rgya mtsho, in his *Dpal dus 'khor dbang skor gyi skor*: "Outer *KCT* is comprised of the elements of the universe in which we live. Inner *KCT* consists of the psychological aggregates, the sensory and psychic capacities of the living beings and so forth. Thirdly, alternative *KCT* is the path of the generation and completion stage yogas, the yogic methods that have the power to purify the above two *Kālacakra*." Quoted in Mullin 1991: 99-10.

<sup>8</sup> The two Tibetan translations of the *SU*, together with a reconstruction of the Sanskrit text by Raniero Gnoli, have been edited in Orofino 1994a. See also Gnoli 1999.

<sup>9</sup> Vajrapāṇi, *Laghutantraṭīkā*, see Cicuzza 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Vajragarbha, *Hevajrapañḍārthaṭīkā* (*Śaṭsāhasrīkā Hevajrapañḍārthaṭīkā*), see Shendge 2004.

<sup>11</sup> Nāropā, *Sekoddeśaṭīkā* (*Paramārthasaṃgraha*), see Sferra, Merzagora 2006. Italian translation with commentary in Gnoli, Orofino 1994.

<sup>12</sup> See the critical edition in Gnoli 1997.

*Seoddeśapañjikā*.<sup>13</sup> There is also another commentary by *Vijayendra*, extant only in its Tibetan translation by Blo gros brtan pa preserved, as all the others, in the Tibetan *bstan 'gyur*.<sup>14</sup>

Other important texts where the *śaḍaṅgayoga* of the Kālacakra school is fully analysed is Anupamarakṣita's *Śaḍaṅgayoga*, a text that precedes Nāropā's *SUṬ*, and the *Guṇabharāṇi*, a later commentary to Anupamarakṣita's *Śaḍaṅgayoga* written in the 13th century by Raviśrijñāna.<sup>15</sup>

I should like to briefly focus here on the specific innovative elements of these treatises, analysing the description of the experiences and visions of light and their importance in the ultimate wisdom realisation process.<sup>16</sup>

In the *SU* (strophes 24-34) we find a very interesting description of the nature of the visions that appear to the yogin during the *śaḍaṅgayoga* practice:

This essential reality has to be attained by the yogin through inconceivable clear visions, like all the signs of smoke, etc., images of wisdom, similar to the sky. (24)

Transcending being or not being, they are experienced<sup>17</sup> by the yogin's own pure mind, completely devoid of material aggregates made of atoms. (25)

These signs are: smoke, mirage, fire-fly, lamp, flame, sun, moon, darkness, lightning, great iridescent sphere (skr. *mahābindu*, tib. *thig le che*): universal image (skr. *viśbabimba*, tib. *sna tshogs gzugs*), luminous radiance. (26)

With eyes half-open, half-closed, the yogin should meditate continually on the undifferentiated image that appears in the emptiness, like a dream. (27)

This meditation on the immaterial image is not a meditation for the yogins. In the mind, there is neither being nor non-being, because in the image an undifferentiated reality appears. (28)

<sup>13</sup> See the critical edition of the *Sekoddeśapañjikā* in: *Annual of the Institute for Comprehensive Studies of Buddhism*, Taishō University, 16, 1994: 354-289.

<sup>14</sup> Vijayendra \**Sekoddeśaṭippanī* (*Dbang mdor bstan pa'i brjed byang*) in P#2014.

<sup>15</sup> See the critical edition in Sferra 2000.

<sup>16</sup> I have already analysed the *śaḍaṅgayoga* according to the *KCT* tradition in Orofino 1996. Here I will briefly summarise the phases of the yoga in connection with luminous apparitions.

<sup>17</sup> Skr. *Pratyayārthaiḥ svacetasaḥ*, Tibetan text A: *rang gyi sems kyi rkyen gyi don*, Tibetan text B: *sems kyi rkyen gyis don rnams dang*. Nāropā, in his *SUṬ* comments: "because they are the perceived by the yogin's own awareness" (skr: *yoḡisvasaṃvedanā* tib. *rnal 'byor pas rang rig pa*).

As a young girl who sees in the divinatory mirror<sup>18</sup> an image not born from any material thing, the yogin sees in the ether the past or future reality. (29)

Of this magic image there is neither being nor non-being, because it is a vision empty of reality. This existence is, in its essence, non-existence, it is like an illusion, a dream, a magic apparition. (30)

In this non-existing reality, a born reality manifests itself and like the wish-fulfilling gem accomplishes the desires of the infinite beings. (31)

As far as the nature of these images is concerned, in his commentary Nāropā explains<sup>19</sup> that they are apparitions (skr. *pratibhāsa*, tib. *rab gsal*) that manifest without a reason, suddenly (tib. *akasmāt*, skr. *blo bur du*), without conceptualisations (skr. *acintita*, tib. *bsam gyis mi khyab pa*), inconceivable. They are signs (skr. *nimitta*, tib. *mtshan ma*), they are images of awareness (skr. *prajñābimba*, tib. *shes rab kyi gzugs brnyan*), i.e. they are the insight (skr. *dhī*, tib. *blo*) of the intrinsic nature of emptiness, that transcends the subject and the object of perception. They are similar to the sky (skr. *nabhaḥsama*, tib. *nam mkha' mnyam pa*), beyond being or not being (skr. *astināstiviyatīkrānta* tib. *yod dang med las rnam par 'das*). Since they are perceived only by the personal self-awareness of the yogin (skr. *yogisvasaṃvedanā* tib. *rnal 'byor pas rang rig pa*), these images are experienced by the yogin's pure mind: they are completely devoid of material aggregates (made of) atoms (skr. *paramāṇurajahsandohaiḥ sarvataḥ parivarjitaiḥ*, tib. *rdul phran las skyes tshogs pa rnam kun nas yongs su dor ba*) since they are forms devoid of any inherent nature, uncreated, marvellous, (endowed) with all aspects.

During the six phases of the *ṣaḍaṅgayoga* the impure breath, the fruit of dichotomous thought and the generator of samsāric vision is stopped. *Prāṇa* is brought into the mystical central channel (skr. *avadhūti*, tib. *kun 'dar ma*) through particular techniques of breath control. Spiritual awakening is obtained through the ascension of the drop (skr. *bindu*, tib. *thig le*) of semen in the central channel.<sup>20</sup> When it reaches the *cakra* of the head, the semen radiates down-

<sup>18</sup> On this ritual of divination see Orofino 1994b.

<sup>19</sup> Gnoli, Orofino 1994: 254; Sferra, Merzagora 2006: 136, 314.

<sup>20</sup> In the subtle physiology of the major part of the Yoga systems in India, the body of the yogin, including channels, winds, locations (*cakra*) is conceived as a microcosm of the universe and the life-giving internal liquid semen is known as *bindu*. Cf. Mallinson, Singleton 2017: xxx.

ward pervading the yogin's body in four increasing stages of ecstasy. At the end of the process, immutable wisdom is realized and the impure saṃsāric breath, the aggregates, the organs are definitively purified and transmuted into their immutable condition.

The first auxiliary is the withdrawal (skr. *pratyāhāra*, tib. *so sor sdud pa*). In the *KCT* tradition, withdrawal corresponds to an interiorisation (skr. *svavrtti*, tib. *rang la 'jug pa*) of the senses and of the sense objects. Their ordinary activity ceases and they are turned in on themselves. In this way, physiological activity is stopped and the yogin sees everything in emptiness, in a non-differentiated way. While in the *GST* tradition the result of this is the apparition of five luminous epiphanies, in the *KCT* tradition we find an addition of a further five signs.

In the *GST* the five luminous epiphanies are:

1. mirage (skr. *marīcika*, tib. *smig rgyu*), 2. smoke (skr. *dhūma*, tib. *du ba*), 3. flash of firefly (skr. *khadyota*, tib. *mkha' snang*), 4. lamp (skr. *pradīpa*, tib. *sgron ma*), and 5. cloudless sky (skr. *nirabhragagana*, tib. *sprin med pa'i nam mkha'*).

In the *KCT* tradition the first 4 epiphanies correspond to those of the *GST* tradition, while the fifth is similar to a flash of flame (skr. *javāla*, tib. *'bar ba*) and a further five are added, with lights similar to: 6. the moon (skr. *chandra*, tib. *zla ba*), 7. the sun (skr. *arka*, tib. *nyi ma*), 8. darkness (skr. *tamaḥ*, tib. *mun can*), 9. flash of lightning (skr. *paramakalā*, tib. *cha shas*), 10. an iridescent sphere (skr. *mahābindu*, tib. *thig le che*) or the universal form of clear light (skr. *viśvabimban prabhāsvara*, tib. *'od gsal sna tshogs gzugs*).

The *LKCT* (V, 115) and *VP*,<sup>21</sup> specify that in order to let the first four signs appear, the yogin has to meditate in a closed dark place, where no light must filter in. This yoga is called night yoga (skr. *rātri yoga*, tib. *mtshan mo'i mal 'byor*) or yoga of space (skr. *akāśayoga* (tib. *nam mkha'i rnal 'byor*). The next six signs will appear by engaging in daylight yoga (skr. *divāyoga*, tib. *nyin mo'i rnal 'byor*) or the yoga of roofless space (skr. *abhyavakāśayoga*, tib. *bla gab med pa rnal 'byor*), that is, a practice performed with one's back to the sun in a space surrounded by four walls but without a roof, whereby the only things the yogin sees is the empty sky. Staring at the empty sky, without any eye movement, the yogin will see a sphere (skr. *bindu*, tib. *thig le*), inside this sphere a black line will appear, emanating rays of shimmering light. In this line will appear the omniscient form (skr. *sarvajñānabimba*, tib. *kun mkhyen gzugs*) like the sun reflected in the water, without hindrance, full of colour, possessing all aspects as one's own mind, without any objective

<sup>21</sup> See Banerjee 1985; Dwivedi, Bahulkar 1994: 53-57.

considerations. This final sign, which embraces the vision of the entire universe, is also described as the Buddha form (skr. *buddhabimba*, tib. *sangs rgyas kyi gzugs*) or, again, as a form of emptiness (skr. *śūnyabimba*, tib. *stong gzugs*). In Nāropā's *SUT* it is described as a pure, translucent image, endowed with all aspects (skr. *viśvabimbaprabhāsvaram*, tib. *sna tshogs gzugs brnyan 'od gsal ba*), corresponding to the realisation of the *Sam̐bhogakāya*.<sup>22</sup>

The second auxiliary of the yoga consists of contemplation (skr. *dhyāna*, tib. *bsam gtan*) that serves to stabilize the manifestation of the form of emptiness (skr. *śūnyabimba*, tib. *stong gzugs*).

In Nāropā's commentary this empty form, kindled by withdrawal and established by contemplation is not a mental visualisation. It is the result of the cessation (skr. *uparama*, tib. *nye bar zhi ba*) of ordinary perception which enables a spontaneous apparition (skr. *pratibhāsa*, tib. *rab tu snang ba*) that illuminates the three worlds and the three times.<sup>23</sup>

The third auxiliary, breath control, *prāṇāyāma* (tib. *srog rtsol ba*) is the branch of the *śaḍaṅgayoga* most emphasised in the *SU* (strophes 35-76). It consists in stopping the two courses of the solar and lunar breath in the right and left channels and bringing the breath into the central channel by means of a specific breathing exercise called *vajrajāpa* (tib. *rdo rje zlas pa*), adamantite recitation, based on inhalation (skr. *purāka*, tib. *dgang ba*) reciting the syllable *Om*, holding the vital breath (skr. *kumbhaka*, tib. *bum pa can*) reciting the syllable *Hūm*, and exhalation (skr. *recaka*, tib. *dbyung ba*) reciting the syllable *Āh*.

The five aggregates (*rūpa*, *vedanā* etc.) that flow in the left nostrils, and the five elements (earth, water etc.) that flow in the right nostrils, dissolve one into the other and are unified in the central channel, where the *prāna* flows into the six *maṇḍala*, the *maṇḍala* of gnosis (skr. *jñāna*, tib. *ye shes*) while the yogin achieves the supreme immutable bliss. The dissolution of the five *maṇḍalas* undergoes an upward process when the breath is in the right channel, with the earth element dissolving into the water element, water into fire, etc. and a downward process when the breath is in the left channel, until the breath enters the *maṇḍala* of gnosis. There it dissolves in emptiness, and thence it reaches the form, endowed with all aspects (skr. *viśvabimba*, tib. *rnam pa thams cad pa'i gzugs*). At this moment the yogin achieves knowledge of supreme immutable bliss, the great perfection of wisdom, the source of all *siddhis*,

<sup>22</sup> See *SUT*, commentary to strophe 26 of *SU* in the edition by Sferra, Merzagora 2006: 137, 314; see also the Italian translation by Gnoli, Orofino 1994: 255.

<sup>23</sup> See Sferra, Merzagora 2006: 143, 321; Gnoli, Orofino 1994: 261.

such as the capacity of flying in the sky, and complete mastery over the three worlds.<sup>24</sup>

Nāropā, in his *SUṬ*, quotes the strophes *LKC*, IV 196-197 and their commentary in *VP*, IV, 119, to introduce an alternative yogin technique, based on a violent method (skr. *haṭhayoga*, tib. *btsan thabs kyi rnal 'byor*) that might be necessary if the realisation of instantaneous immutable wisdom does not arise, if the yogin is unable to control his breath perfectly.<sup>25</sup> The yogin should then force his breath to flow in the central channel through the practice of resonance (skr. *nāda* tib. *nāda goms pa*) and restrain the bodhicitta drops, (skr. *bodhicittabindu*, tib. *byang chub kyi sems kyi thig le*) in the jewel of the vajra (skr. *kulīsamāni*, tib. *rdo rje nor bu*), a metaphor for the male sexual organ, while it stays in the lotus of the wisdom (skr. *prajñābja*; tib. *shes rab kyi chu skyes*) the female sexual organ. As a consequence of this practice the yogin, not moving, will achieve the realisation of the immutable instantaneous wisdom.

As Mallinson and Szántó have noticed, the *haṭhayoga* “violent” method was already circulating in the Vajrayāna milieu in the 11th century, as the *LKC* verses demonstrates. These techniques of controlling the breath, and thereby semen, were first elaborated in detail in a Vajrayāna work called the *Amṛtasiddhi*, “The Attainment of Immortality” a Buddhist manual of tantric yoga and alchemical teachings written around the second half of the 11th century.<sup>26</sup>

The fourth auxiliary, retention (skr. *dhāraṇā*, tib. *'dzin pa*) represents a stage of progression of the previous yoga. The key point of this stage is the unification of the vital force (tib. *srog*) with the *bindu*, (tib. *thig le*) the subtle energy, into the *avadhūtī* and meditate on the supreme immutable wisdom.<sup>27</sup>

In the fifth auxiliary, mindfulness (skr. *anusmṛti*, tib. *rjes su dran pa*), the *bindu* at the crown is aroused by the heat or fire of desire, engendered by the presence or by the representation of a woman. The energy of lust hypostasised as a feminine power lying in the navel cakra is called *caṇḍalī* (tib. *gtum mo*). This *caṇḍalī* flares up naturally and with its heat it starts to melt the white seed (the moon) of the *bodhicitta* that gradually flows down from the head. The descent of the seed is effected through four stages, each char-

<sup>24</sup> This passage from *LKCT*, V, 122 and *VP*, is quoted in Nāropā's *SUṬ*, see Sferra, Merzagora 2000: 135-136, 312; Gnoli, Orofino 1994: 251-252.

<sup>25</sup> See Sferra, Merzagora 2006: 133-134; 308-309; Gnoli, Orofino 1994: 246-247.

<sup>26</sup> See Mallinson, Szántó 2021. See also Grimes 2020.

<sup>27</sup> *Srog ni thig ler gzhus par bya/ abadhūti'i zhabs brten nas/ mchog tu mi 'gyur bsgom par bya//* [The yogin] has to combine the vital force into the *bindu*, and, with the *avadhūtī* as his bases, will meditate on the supreme immutable [wisdom]. *SU*, 77, in Orofino 1994a: 80-81.

acterized by different and ever-increasing sensations of joy (skr. *ananda*, tib. *dga' ba*). The yogin experiences a blissful condition, which in the *VP*, IV, 126 is compared to the ten states of *kāma*: fixation, desire, fever, pallor of the face, loss of appetite, trembling, folly, dizziness, mental confusion, complete insensibility, and correspond to the ten visions of smoke etc., which are not limited only to the 'withdrawal' phase and are now repeated. Then the deity visualized by the yogin appears like a reflected image beyond distinct representations, an image (or form) of emptiness (skr. *śūnya-bimba*, tib. *stong gzugs*), culminating in a radiant luminous maṇḍala, (skr. *prabhamāṇḍala*, tib. *dri med 'od kyi dkyil 'khor*) that pervades the whole universe.

The sixth auxiliary, the final stage, *samādhi*, is the realisation of *apraṭiṣṭitanirvāṇa* (tib. *rab tu mi gnas mya ngan 'das*) in which immutable gnosis is accomplished. The yogin attains the pure body (skr. *śuddhakāya*, tib. *dag pa'i sku*) by dissolving the 21,600 impure saṃsāric breaths of one-day-and night cycle.

Thus karmic breathing is completely eliminated and the body becomes filled with 21,600 instants of the supreme immutable wisdom, no longer karmic breathing, but corresponding to the complete purification of the coarse body into its ultimate reality.

At the end of the *śaḍaṅgayoga* process, the thirty-six coarse and impure elements of the physical body are completely purified and transmuted into their immutable condition, corresponding to the thirty-six deities of the six families which coalesce in a single essence (skr. *ekasamarasībhūtānī*, tib. *gcig tu ro mnyam par 'gyur pa*) and manifest through the state of enlightenment accomplished in a single instant (skr. *ekakṣanābhisambodhi*, tib. *skad cig gcig gis mngon par rdzogs par byang chub*) in the condition called "empty iridescent sphere" (skr. *binduśūnya*, tib. *thig le stong pa*). According to *LKC* and *VP*, the yogin experiences a condition free from differentiated representations and is completely merged in the great all-pervading ecstasy (skr. *paramāksarasukha*, tib. *mchod tu mi 'gyur ba'i bde ba*), his physical body transformed into a spiritual body defined as two in one (skr. *yuganaddha*, tib. *zung 'jug*). He is purified by a luminous maṇḍala, that shines forth from the image of wisdom (skr. *jñānabimba*, tib. *ye shes gzugs*) or image of emptiness (skr. *śūnya-bimba*, tib. *stong pa'i gzugs*) and also radiates from the pores of his own body.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *LKC*, IV, 118-119 and *VP* quoted in *SUT*, see Sferra, Merzagora, 2006: 132-133, 307-308 and Gnoli, Orofino, 1994: 245-246. On the realisation of the immutable wisdom see also Orofino 2009: 27-49.

*The Guhyagarbatantra in Klong chen pa's vision*

The KCT Tantric Buddhist system is not alone in describing ten luminous epiphanies as the mark of spiritual realisation in the *ut-pattikrama* process. According to the *Gsang snying 'grel pa phyogs bcu mun sel* (PCMS), the 14th century commentary by Klong chen Rab 'byams, or Klong chen pa (1308-1364), the \**Guhyagarbhatantra* (GGT), the fundamental scripture of the Rnying ma tradition, belonging to the *Māyājālatantra* cycle and classified as Mahāyoga tantra,<sup>29</sup> also describes ten of them, with very similar lexicon and meaning.

It is interesting, however, to note that already in the 11th century, Puṇḍarīka, in his *VP*, commenting on *LKCT*, V, 115, observes that the description of the 10 marks of spiritual realisation is found, expressed in an intentional language, in the *Nāmasaṅgīti* (NS), a short, but very influential scripture which, according to tradition, belongs to the *Māyājālatantra* cycle.<sup>30</sup>

In the *VP*, we read (commentary on *LKC*, V, 115):

The yogin will gaze a cloudless sky and through the day-light yoga «a great fire of insightful wisdom, arisen from the sky, self-arisen» (NS, 6.20 c-d) will appear. From this sky a flame will arise, meaning that the yogin will see a flame in a cloudless sky. Similarly, «a great brilliant light, light of wisdom, shining bright» (NS, 6.21 a-b) refers to the apparition of a moon. «Lamp of the world» (NS, 6.21 c) refers to the apparition of the sun. «Lamp of wisdom» (NS, 6.21 c) refers to the apparition of Rāhu. «Great splendor» (NS, 6.21 d) is the flash of lightning. «Radiant light» (NS, 6.21 d), «the king of *vidyā*, the tremendous lord of mantra (NS, 6.22 a), refers to the iridescent sphere (skr. *bindu*, tib. *thig le*).

Therefore, the signs are ten, as proclaimed by the Bhagavan: those of the “night yoga”, according to the *Guhyasamājatantra* etc. and those of the “day-light yoga”, according to the *NS*, [conveyed] in

<sup>29</sup> See Dorje 1987: 37-58; Martin 1987; Eastman 1983; van Schaik, *In search of the Guhyagarbhatantra*, <https://earlytibet.com/2007/08/27/in-search-of-the-guhyagarbhatantra>, accessed 28/04/2022.

<sup>30</sup> The *Nāmasaṅgīti* (NS) also known as *Āryamañjuśrīnāmasaṅgīti*, appeared in India probably at the beginning of the 8th cent. and assumed a fundamental importance in KCT tradition. In its introduction and colophon we find an explicit claim to its scriptural transmission, stating that it was proclaimed in the *Samādhi* chapter of the great *Māyājālatantra*, a tantra believed to have existed in sixteen thousand lines but not more extant. See Mukherji 1963; Davidson 1981; Wayman 1985; Banārasī 1986. As observed by Antony Tribe, a range of NS terms and verses were read as legitimating central Kālacakra doctrines. The *VP*, in fact, quotes 65 NS verses and describes the *LKC* and *NS* as connected at a fundamental level. See Tribe 2015. See also Wallace 2001: 18–21.

an intentional language.<sup>31</sup>

This interesting mention of the *NS*, and thus of the tradition of the *Māyājālatantra*, induces one to think that Klong chen pa in the *PCMS*, in listing the 10 signs of spiritual realisation, relating them to the tradition of the *Māyājālatantra*, refers to more ancient conceptions that had already been circulating at least since the formation of the *LKC* and the *VP*.<sup>32</sup>

In the *PCMS*, we read:<sup>33</sup>

The four realities are:

1. the reality of non-dual body, free from all the subject-object considerations since there is no attachment to male and female [consort];
2. the reality of non-dual speech, free from all conceptual elaborations and desire since it is inexpressible;
3. the reality of non-dual mind, that perceives the essence of the nature of the *dharmakāya* since it is free from accumulated thoughts in supreme bliss;
4. and the reality of non-dual wisdom, abiding in the great dimension of non-attachment to bliss, which is an interrupted continuous circle of radiant light.

The four clear lights are:

1. the clear light of bliss, through which at that time when the three doors (body, speech and mind) are pervaded with delight, all phenomenal existence arises as delightful bliss;
2. the clear light of radiance through which, from the state of bliss, the inner radiant essence of mind unceasingly appears as skillful means and wisdom;
3. the clear light of not conceptualisation through which sensations of attachment to subtle and gross elements disappear, so that one abides in a non-conceptual state without any [mental] proliferation;
4. and the inner radiance of the inconceivable (*bsam gyis mi khyab par 'od gsal*) through which the apparition of ten signs arise from the essential dimension of reality.

The ten signs are the indication of the single flavor of [the unification of] space and wisdom which emerge through the entry of the vital energy and the mind into the central channel.

[They are]: 1. smoke, 2. mirage, 3. cloud, 4. firefly, 5. sun, 6. moon,

<sup>31</sup> This passage from *LKCT*, V, 115 and *VP* is quoted in *SUT*. See Sferra, Merzgora 2006: 122, 292; Gnoli, Orofino 1994: 227-228.

<sup>32</sup> As already noted by Germano 1994: 245-249, Klong chen pa, in some of his doxographies, correlates the *KCT* system, of the Gsar ma tradition, with the *GGT* and the *Māyājālatantra* (*Sgyu 'phrul dra ba*) system of the Rnying ma tradition.

<sup>33</sup> *PCMS*: 343-344, see also Dorje 1987: 827-828.

7. blazing gemstones, 8. Rāhu (*sgra gcan*), 9. star, 10. vision of rays of light.

In other categories of tantra, a slightly different list of the ten signs is enumerated.

As to the final result or the attainment of the Buddhahood:

The result is that, through [the experiences] rising from the firm stability in the practice of suchness, indicated by the ten signs of the *samādhi* of skillful means and wisdom, [related to] the *Māyājālatantra*, the nature of all *maṇḍala* of the Buddhas, without exceptions, which emerge in the ten directions and four times, and the ultimate, compassionate wisdom become manifest to the beings of the three realms.

Again in the *PCMS*, commenting chapter XII of the *GGT*, Klong chen pa says:

Thus, because Akaniṣṭha is present within oneself from the very beginning, Buddhahood is attained through the clear visualisations of the creation and perfection stages. Indeed, the pure fields of Buddha-body and wisdom are not sought or accomplished in other world-systems of the ten directions:

«From any of the ten directions and four times, the perfect Buddha will not be found. 'Mind as such' is the perfect Buddha. Do not search elsewhere for the Buddha». (*GGT*, XII, 14).

In a pleasant dark house, one should assume the seven postures of Vairocana, without moving.

It is said in the *Sgyu 'phrul lam rim* (*\*Māyājālapathakrama*):<sup>34</sup>

«Therefore, with blissful joy, in excellent equilibrium, one assumes the position of venerable Vairocana, endowed with seven postures, and sits with a mental attitude, free from grasping and striving».

The seven postures are crossed legs, equipoised hands, the waist straight as a rod of copper coins, the neck gently bent, the eyes focused on the tip of the nose, the tongue meeting the palate, and the lips and teeth finally set in their natural positions. In particular from the space between the eyebrows one should fix one's gaze on space to a distance of twelve fingers, one should not speak, and should abandon oneself into the dimension of the space, without thinking of anything. One who has done this for one, three, seven days will perceive signs of smoke etc. Similarly, one who has done this for fourteen days or for twenty-one or for one month will first-ly perceive smoke-like sign and the appearances similar to cloud, mirage, fire-flies, butter lamp, and sun-light.

It is said in the *Sgyu 'phrul lam rim*:

<sup>34</sup> This text is attributed to Buddhaguhya, and is included in the *Bka' ma rgyas pa* (KG) collection under the title *Lam rin chen mo*. See KG. Vol. 23: 5.1-133.3. It is also called *Lam rnam par bkod pa* and is found under this name in the Peking edition (P) of the Tibetan canon (P#4736).

«One encounters [signs] which resemble mirage, smoke, clouds, fireflies, butter-lamps, and sun light».

In those times, one should remain [seated] rejecting all outer, inner and secret activities of the body, speech and mind.

In the same text it is said:

«One should abandon all breaks and intervals, based on cause and result, and the conceptual elaborations of the nine kinds of doctrinal conduct. One should not even undertake that which is present in one's own mental continuum, because one would be distracted by dualistic wrong perceptions».

...Having experienced the yoga of darkness in this way, during the day time, one remains in a condition without thoughts, keeping the previous position and folded hands.

From the *Sgyu 'phrul lam rim*:

«Through a sequence, which is non conceptual, very non conceptual, and extremely non-conceptual, without establishing oneself in a fixed position, without thought, without conceited mind, beyond conceptual objects of speech and thought, the wisdom of the dimension of reality as-it-is [manifests itself]: the natural unwavering luminosity of reality, the union of *śamatha* and *vipaśyanā*».

.....This method applies at the time when the uncorrupted state is accomplished by means of clear light. As for the signs: four visions appear which are similar to the diverse visions of five lights: iridescent sphere (*thig le*), blazing gemstone, Rāhu's *maṇḍala* (the eclipse). In the *NS* it is said:

«He is Śrīvasta, the glorious knot, glowing with bright light, the hand shining with blazing light». (8.26 c-d).<sup>35</sup>

And: «The light of wisdom, shining upon, the lamp of the world, the torch of wisdom brilliant garland, pleasant to behold». (6.21 b-c-d).<sup>36</sup>

From the *Avatamsakasūtra*:<sup>37</sup>

«Through the union of gemstone and ocean, [appear] splendid maṇḍalas of light, some of which radiate in the center or the sky».

Now: "Śrīvasta" and the "gemstone" refer to the heart. The "ocean" refers to the eyes: and "through their union appear" refers to the forms of emptiness (*stong gzugs*) which appear in the sky.

<sup>35</sup> *Śrīvatsaḥ suprabho dīptirbhābhāsarakaradyutiḥ* (*NS* 8.26, c-d).

<sup>36</sup> *Jñāṇīyotir virocanaḥ jagatpradīpadīpo jñānolko mahātejāḥ prabhāsvaraḥ* (*NS* 6.21 b-c-d). Klong chen pa's version of this strophe is slightly different here: he translates the skr. *prabhāsvaraḥ* with the tib. *lta na sdug*, pleasant to behold, for 'od gsal ba, clear light.

<sup>37</sup> The *Buddhāvataṃsakasūtra* is one of the most influential Mahāyāna sūtra in East Asia. It has come to us in two Chinese versions, one translated by Buddhahadra in 418-420 C.E. and the other by Śikṣānanda in 695-699 C.E. as well as in a Tibetan version translated by Jnamitra, Surendrabodhi and Ye shes sde at the end of the 9<sup>th</sup> century (tib. *Sang rgyas pal po che zhes bya ba shin tu rgyas pa chen po'i mdo*). The Tibetan version is preserved in all the *Bka' 'gyur* editions. See Ōtake 2007; Cleary 1993.

Such apparitions are known as “the vision of direct perception of reality” (*chos nyid mngon sum gyi snang ba*).

When, [during these apparitions], one's lifespan comes to an end, in the next life one will be born in a pure Buddha-field, and having obtained power over the lifespan, one will attain perfection. The attainment of this is the [apparition] of the secret iridescent sphere (*gsang ba'i thig le*) etc. Then, through cultivation, the movement of the vital energy of the five elements wanes in wisdom. This all-pervasive natural appearance of the five wisdoms is known as “vision of the increasing contemplative experience” (*nyams gong 'phel gyi snang ba*). Then, cultivating that experience, the five enlightened families of the Buddha-fields are perceived; and this is known as “vision that reaches the limit of awareness” (*rig pa tshad phebs kyi snang ba*). It is said that one bears aloft all maṇḍalas without exception as ornaments. Then, once the ingress of the vital energy of the five elements into the five wisdoms has ceased to increase, all appearances become like a cloudless sky; and this is known as the “vision of the dissolution into essential reality” (*chos nyid zad pa'i snang ba*).

At this point the spontaneous, natural presence (*lhun grub*) gets closer.<sup>38</sup>

Here Klong chen pa correlates the 10 epiphanies of light, the signs of spiritual realisation of the GGT with the four spontaneous luminous visions of the “direct transcendence” (*thod rgal*) system of Rdzogs chen Atiyoga belonging to the set of Rdzogs chen instructions called *man ngag gi sde* of the tripartite system of the three series *sems sde*, *klong sde* and *man ngag gi sde*.<sup>39</sup>

These four visions are: 1. the vision of direct perception of reality (*chos nyid mngon sum gyi snang ba*), 2. the vision of the increasing of contemplative experience (*nyams gong 'phel gyi snang ba*), 3. the vision of reaching the limit of awareness (*rig pa tshad phebs kyi snang ba*), 4. the vision of the cessation of phenomenal reality (*chos nyid zad pa'i snang ba*).<sup>40</sup>

This reflects the Rnying ma polymath's strategy, quite evident in all his doxographic writings, of relating the Rdzogs chen tradition with other previous Buddhist traditions, in the wider context of Tibetan Buddhist schools.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup> See PCMS: 464-467.

<sup>39</sup> On the history of these three classes in the Rdzogs chen tradition see Karmay 1988: 207-215.

<sup>40</sup> On the experiential nature of the four *thod rgal* visions in a non-dual, primordial perspective cf. Laish 2017; see also Hatchell 2014: 60.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Germano 1994: 242 et seq. In particular, on Klong chen pa's interpretation of the GGT in a Rdzogs chen perspective, see Achard 1999: 70-76.

*The Seventeen Tantras of the Snying thig tradition*

As mentioned above, soon after its apparition in India at the beginning of the 11th cent., the *KCT* literature was transferred to Tibet and translated into Tibetan by various authors.<sup>42</sup>

At the same period and in the centuries immediately following, we can observe the emergence in Tibet of the *Snying thig* tantric scriptures in the Rnying ma Rdzogs chen tradition incorporating new tantric doctrines and practices, radically altering the earliest Rnying ma Mahāyoga and Atiyoga literature and developing a complex series of meditation techniques of its own.<sup>43</sup> In these scriptures, as time passes starting from the 12<sup>th</sup> cent., we observe an evolving model of visionary yoga based on a various contemplative practices that induce visions of lights, radiant nets, concentric circles of rainbow light, iridescent empty spheres. These practices were performed in dark spaces, or meditating on the empty clear sky during the day, or gazing at the rays of the sun at dawn or at sunset.<sup>44</sup>

The earliest known *Snying thig* scriptures are the collection of tantras known as *Rnying ma rgyud bcu bdun* (*Seventeen Tantras*), and a collection of miscellaneous texts known as *Bi ma Snying thig*. In these scriptures visions of light play, as in the *KCT* literature, a fundamental role and interesting analogies in defining luminous epiphanies.

In the third chapter of the *Tantra of the Blazing Lamps* (*Sgron ma 'bar ba'i rgyud*), for example, one of the tantras belonging to the *Rnying ma rgyud bcu bdun* collection,<sup>45</sup> we find a pseudo-etymological definition of the term *thig le stong pa* (empty iridescent sphere) which appears various times in the *LKC*, in the *VP*, and in all the exegetic literature, as we have seen above.

The lamp of the empty iridescent sphere belongs to the description of the four lamps, i.e. the visions that appear to the yogin in practising the “direct transcendence” (*thod rgal*) system of Rdzogs chen Atiyoga. The other 3 lamps are: the lamp of the essence of

<sup>42</sup> On the textual transmission of the Tibetan translations see Orofino 1994a: 17-28.

<sup>43</sup> For a thorough discussion of the *Snying thig* tradition see Karmay 1988: 206-215; Germano 1994; Germano 2005; van Shaik 2004: 8-9; Hatchell 2014: 54.

<sup>44</sup> The earliest reference to the dark retreat (*mun mtsams*) in the Rdzogs chen tradition is to be found in the fourth chapter of the *Snying thig Ya bzhi*, in the *Gcud phur gsum gyi rgyab yig gnad bsdus sgron me*, attributed to Lce btsun Seng ge dbang phyug, see Bibliography below. I owe this information to James Duncan Gentry.

<sup>45</sup> *Gser gyi me tog can mdzes par rin po che'i sgron ma 'bar ba'i rgyud*, in *Rnying ma rgyud bcu bdun*, see Bibliography below.

awareness (*rig pa dbyings kyi sgron ma*), the lamp of self-originated wisdom (*shes rab rang byung gyi sgron ma*), the lamp of the far-reaching water lasso (*rgyang zhags chu'i sgron ma*).<sup>46</sup>

The lamp of the empty iridescent sphere is the proof of all dharma. Those who rely on it, experience the dimension of empty iridescent sphere (*thig le stong pa*), obtain the experiential domain of the practice of those who are familiar with the View.

Therefore, its essence is unique, subtle, free from thoughts, great inner radiance, free from the darkness of emptiness.

Its nature is inherently luminous, equal, abiding in a spherical dimension of non-conceptuality and of freedom from elaboration.

Since the four self-empowerments are perfected without being conferred, it appears as radiant from the origin, naturally luminous, tinged with red.

Since it is essentially pure and immaculate, it is free from the afflictions of the chains of ego, it is empty of essence, it is one's own inherent luminosity.

This is proclaimed as the very essence [of this lamp].

As for [the meaning of] *thig*: it is immutable, straight, since the origin free from conceptualisation.

As for the meaning of *le*: within the great all-pervading space, visions are complete in their own dimension.

As for the meaning of *stong pa* (empty): It refers to the interruption of all mental desires and of attachment to material things.

The lamp causes the five lights to appear, together with the clear awareness of one's own real nature.

This is the analytical definition of the words.<sup>47</sup>

This passage is commented in the *Necklace of Pearls (Mu tig phreng ba)*:<sup>48</sup>

As for the word "*thig*": it refers to the straight, unchanging path, "*le*" [refers to] the universal, all-pervading awareness manifests in all objects. "*Stong pa*" (empty) means that although it manifests in that way, it is not established as a concrete phenomenon. "*Lamp*" means that having cleared away the darkness of saṃsāra, the vi-

<sup>46</sup> See Achard 1999: 140-142; Laish 2017: 222-225.

<sup>47</sup> *Gser gyi me tog can mdzes par rin po che'i sgron ma 'bar ba'i rgyud* (A 'dzom edition): 480-481. Cf. Hatchell 2014: 201-264.

<sup>48</sup> *Gser gyi me tog mdzes pa rin po che sgron ma 'bar ba'i rgyud don gsal bar byed pa mu tig phreng ba brgyus pa*, ascribed to Vimalamitra, deemed lost, has only recently been included in the latest edition of the *Bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa* collection, see *Bka' ma shin tu rgyas pa* (Kaḥthog), see Bibliography below. On the legend of Vimalamitra, the "Vimalamitra rdzogs chen lore" and the numerous texts attributed to him in the Tibetan Rnying ma [tradition see Gruber 2016](#). See also Almogi 2016: 7 et seq.

sion of nirvāṇa is manifested. Since it is not a mental analysis, external conceptual elaboration is eliminated through the general characteristics of phenomena. Having eliminated the internal conceptual elaboration through the intrinsic characteristics [of phenomena], those who recognize themselves, and are devoted to this [lamp], develop confidence.

Those fortunate people who know, without error, the secret profound instruction of this very lamp, enjoy the experience of the form of the empty single (*nyag gcig*) iridescent sphere, in the dimension of space. Therefore, they are familiar (*goms pa*) with the View (*lta ba*), namely since the vision of the direct perception of reality (*rig pa mngon sum gyi snang ba*), the vision of the increasing of the contemplative experience (*nyams goms 'phel gyi snang ba*) and the vision of reaching the limit of awareness (*rig pa tshad phebs kyi snang ba*) become certain within the experience of the natural sense organs, the result is obtained in this (life) itself. In this way, in order to obtain it, the empty iridescent sphere (*thig le stong pa*) [manifests itself].<sup>49</sup>

In the *Snying thig* literature, in particular in the *Rnying ma rgyud bcu bdun*, visions of light, triggered by meditation and appearing as iridescent spheres, or luminous strings (*lu gu rgyud*), become a central element and are described in a detailed fashion.

With increasing clarity, these texts outline the metaphysics of light in the Rdzogs chen tradition. The person's physical body, and in particular the centre of the heart, is considered the vessel that contains pure wisdom, manifest as iridescent and radiant light. This vessel is defined as "a youthful body in a vase" (*gzhon nu bum pa'i sku*). The yogic practice aims at inducing the apparition of luminous forms and visions representing pure awareness, as in his visions the yogin recognises his own innate wisdom and achieves complete awakening. The culmination of the meditation practice consists of a transmutation of the physical body into rainbow light ('*ja' lus*).<sup>50</sup>

While drawing its initial inspiration from *KCT* literature, this tradition differs from it in yoga techniques, in the physiological description of the inner channels and *cakra*, and in philosophical theory. It develops – in an increasingly articulated and radical manner – the theme of light and the visions triggered by it, in an ontological and cosmological perspective that identifies light as the first form of all material reality, connecting together the physi-

<sup>49</sup> *Gser gyi me tog mdzes pa rin po che sgron ma 'bar ba'i rgyud don gsal bar byed pa mu tig phreng ba brgyus pa*: 247-248.

<sup>50</sup> On a reflection on the phenomenon of the rainbow body in Tibetan culture see Kapstein 2004.

cal and metaphysical level within the dimension of light.

In another of the *Seventeen Tantras*, the *Rig pa rang shar chen po'i rgyud*,<sup>51</sup> the *Tantra of the Self Arisen Awareness*, in chapter 29, we read:

In the continuum of all sentient beings the state of the authentic awakening (*yang dag sang rgyas dgongs pa*) is present in the form of body (*kāya*) and wisdom.

Moreover, these are present in the centre of the heart (*tsitta*), a small seed, just the size of a mustard seed, in a perfect, not generated mode.

There are four doors at the centre of the heart that are luminous, unobstructed, causing appearing as a form, causing disappearing as a form, causing the instantaneous moment appearing, causing the instantaneous moment disappearing.

Further, when reciting their names they are: the major channel of the golden "kati" (*kati gser gyi rtsa chen*), the empty and hollow crystal tube, the subtle and coiled thread of white silk, and the great channel of self-liberated emptiness.

Then the self-appearing channels of the four doors follow the path and disappear in the *avadhūti*.

In the *dhūti* light radiates, follows the path along the right side of the spine and along the right side of the artery descending from the head, and disappear into the conch palace (the skull). From that place light irradiates and the four lamps manifest.

In the empty, unobstructed sky, the clear vivid body of light (*'od kyi sku*) abides in the form of luminous strings (*lu gu rgyud*).

The four lamps are thus:

The lamp of the empty iridescent sphere (*thig le stong pa'i sgron ma*), the lamp of the essence of awareness (*rig pa dbying kyi sgron ma*), the lamp of self-originated wisdom (*shes rab rang byung gyi sgron ma*), the lamp of the far-reaching water lasso (*rgyang zhags chu'i sgron ma*).

They abide in all sentient beings.<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, in these texts we find a metaphysical re-elaboration of themes characteristic of tantric literature, such as the description of the maṇḍala which, albeit maintaining the classical outline, well-known from previous Indian Buddhist tantras, is deconstructed into a pure luminous manifestation.

In the *Tantra of the Mirror of Samantabhadra's Mind* (*Kun tu bzang*

<sup>51</sup> *Rig pa rang shar chen po'i rgyud* in *Rnying ma rgyud bcu bdun*, see Bibliography below.

<sup>52</sup> *Rig pa rang shar chen po'i rgyud* (A 'dzom edition): 526-527.

*po thugs kyi me long gi rgyud*),<sup>53</sup> another of the *Seventeen Tantras*, as initial description of the maṇḍala of the Blessed One, we read:

The Kāya, (the Blessed One), manifestly unconditioned, in the indivisible dimension of Akaniṣṭha, was sitting on the Diamond Throne (*rdo rje gdan*), {the luminous maṇḍala of awareness}<sup>54</sup> which has neither exterior nor an interior, {as the five lights are clear, without blending} and which is always present, {together with the assembly of the five families}.

When we look at it from the outside, the inside is clear, {in the immaculate maṇḍala of the heart (*tsitta'i dkyil 'khor*)} while when we look at it from the inside, the outside is clear {wisdom manifests as an object}.

Rays of light beam out in the ten directions {the five lights of wisdom shine without declining}, supreme dimension of encircling rims {in this regard they are connected with lamps}. The five wisdoms shine as stars {through them in the celestial space the mass of five lights shines bright}.

The five bodies shine without having any front or back {there from the vast expanse of awareness the five Kāyas shine glittering}.

The five lights shine out without blending {the colours are distinct} as a symbol of the essential meaning, the clear light of the maṇḍala of awareness (*rig pa'i dkyil 'khor*) {the vision of the five lights in oneself} is fully manifest.<sup>55</sup>

These descriptions of luminous epiphanies and, in particular, of empty iridescent spheres are widely described in all the tantras of the *Rnying ma rgyud bcu bdun*. By way of example, in the *Mu tig rin po che phreng ba rgyud*, three forms of iridescent sphere are described: 1. of the ground (*gzhi'i thig le*), 2. of the path, (*lam kyi thig le*), 3. of the fruition (*'bras bu thig le*). These visions are defined as the beautiful ornamental sphere of the ultimate reality of the dharmadhātu (*chos nyid dbyings kyi rgyan bzang thig le*).<sup>56</sup>

It is interesting to note that in this same tantra appears for the first time the terms—later used by Klong chen pa—of the twofold practices of “Cutting stiffness” or “Cutting through solidity” (*khregs chod*) and practice of “Direct Transcendence” or “Leap

<sup>53</sup> *Kun tu bzang po thugs kyi me long gi rgyud*, in *Rnying ma rgyud bcu bdun*, see Bibliography below.

<sup>54</sup> The translation between curly braces indicates the marginal annotation found in the Tibetan text.

<sup>55</sup> *Kun tu bzang po thugs kyi me long gi rgyud* (A 'dzom edition): 235-236.

<sup>56</sup> *Mu tig rin po che phreng ba'i rgyud* in *Rnying ma rgyud bcu bdun*, see Bibliography below. On these three differentiations, also in the tantra *Nyi za kha sbyor gsang ba'i rgyud*, see Achard 1999: 132-136.

over" (*nyams blangs khregs chod thod rgal*).<sup>57</sup>

As we have seen above, the *Snying thig* literature and in particular its initial core of the *Rnying ma rgyud bcu bdun* began to emerge in Tibet starting from the second half of the 11<sup>th</sup> century, in a period of great intellectual and religious turmoil, in which the different schools started to form.<sup>58</sup> The history of the formation of the canon of the Ancients and of the nucleus of the *Rnying ma rgyud bcu bdun* has been dealt with in detail elsewhere and is not the subject of this study.<sup>59</sup> It suffices to recall that the collection of the *Seventeen Tantras* is deemed to go back to the mythical and shadowy figure of Vimalamitra, the Indian master who, according to tradition, conferred these teachings on Myang Ting nge 'dzin, who in turn hid the texts in the temple of Zhwa'i lha khang during the imperial period. According to tradition, many years after Vimalamitra's departure for China, Myang conferred the teachings of the *Seventeen Tantras* on 'Brom Rin chen 'bar, who hid them in the temple. At the end of the eleventh century, the monk Ldan ma lhun rgyal found the texts and showed them to Lce btsun Seng ge dbang phyug (12<sup>th</sup> cent.?), who re-arranged the *Snying thig* teachings. The first historical author was Zhang ston Bkra shis rdo rje (1097–1167) who vouches, for the first time in his *Snying thig lo rgyus chen mo*, the transmission of the tantras of the *Snying thig* from Dga' rab rdo rje, to Vimalamitra, to himself.<sup>60</sup> The year 1167 thus marks the *terminus ad quem* for the formation of the *Snying thig* texts.

This *Snying thig* literature presents an earlier Rdzogs chen apophatic, non-conceptual rhetoric interwoven with innovative contemplative methods that absorb and transform the practices of Mahāyoga and the later Indian esoteric Buddhist traditions (in particular the *KCT*) within a metaphysics of light as the frame of reference.

The later exegesis and reorganisation of the system by Rdzogs chen masters of whom Klong chen pa is one of the most important, follow and develop this pattern.<sup>61</sup>

He reorganised the practices and instructions of the Esoteric precepts series (*man ngag gi sde*) into two main categories: that of *khregs chod*, "Cutting through solidity" and of *thod rgal* "Direct transcendence", which are mentioned, as we have seen, in one of

<sup>57</sup> *Mu thig rin po che phreng ba'i rgyud*, Adzom edition: 536.

<sup>58</sup> On the dating of the most ancient layers of *Snying thig* literature, cf. Germano 1994: 266-275; Achard 1999: 25-97.

<sup>59</sup> See Karmay 1988: 209-211.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Cf. van Shaik 2004: 9.

the *Seventeen Tantras*, the *Mu tig rin po che phreng ba'i rgyud*. Indeed, we owe to Klong chen pa the first, elaborated, description of the category of the practices of the *thod rgal* which he deemed superior to those of the *khregs chod*.<sup>62</sup>

The practices of *thod rgal*, which take place in a dimension of relaxation, letting go, naturalness and openness also require, however, the use of breathing techniques and specific postures, namely the posture of the lion (*seng ge*), of the elephant (*glang che*) and of the sage (*drang srong*), associated with the three modes of gazing, upward, sideward or downward, each of which is apt to induce particular luminous visions connected to specific experiences linked to the dimensions of the three Kāyas, being the pure essence of awareness, the spontaneous co-emergent self-appearance of luminous awareness, the inherent joyfulness of visionary awareness.<sup>63</sup>

As mentioned above, the apparitions of lights and luminous visions of the *Snying thig* represent an innovation within the previous Rdzogs chen tradition and many scholars have pondered the sources of this visionary practice. Several hypotheses have been advanced, starting from Giuseppe Tucci who remarked the relationship between Rdzogs chen and Kashmir Śaivism.<sup>64</sup> Jean Luc Achard, as well, wondered about contacts with the non-dual Śaiva Trika system, in particular with the practices of the *Vijñānabhairavatantra*.<sup>65</sup> David Germano, as well, reflecting on the sources of this visionary practice, made several hypothesis: «an indigenous shamanistic set of techniques perhaps first incorporated by the Bonpos, contact with Illuminationist Sufis to the West, Daoist yogas to the East, Kashmiri Śaivism to the Southwest, or perhaps even some subcurrents of Indian Buddhist tantra (such as reflected in the *Kālacakratantra*)?»<sup>66</sup>

This last hypothesis seems to me the most fitting. Contacts with the Śaiva and Buddhist tantras have since been properly focused on by scientific studies<sup>67</sup> as well as the strong syncretism with other Indian religious systems of the *KCT* literature.<sup>68</sup> The foreign el-

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<sup>62</sup> See Germano 1994: 287.

<sup>63</sup> See Laish 2017: 217-222.

<sup>64</sup> See Tucci 1970: 214.

<sup>65</sup> See Achard 1999: 248-253.

<sup>66</sup> See Germano 1994: 288.

<sup>67</sup> See Sanderson 1995; Sanderson 2009: 124-243; Isaacson 2010; Wedemeyer 2013.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Wallace 2001: 31-42; Sferra 2005. On the Islamic elements in *KCT* literature see Orofino 1997; Newman 1998.

ements suggested, whether Śaiva or of other non-Indian provenance, do not, in my opinion, derive from any direct contact, but from influences of the *KCT* literature. The great importance of luminous experience in the *KCT*, already in itself an innovation as compared to previous Buddhist tantras, is developed and broadened by the authors of the first nucleus of *Snying thig* literature in the centuries subsequent to the introduction of the *KCT* in Tibet.

Nevertheless, although it is quite difficult to trace any direct influences and contacts between the Kālacakra yogins and the Tibetan initiators of the *Snying thig* tantras, there is evidence that many ideas, lexicon, yoga techniques and contemplative experiences were circulating among them creating nets of influence during a period of Tibetan history that preceded the later organisation and consolidation of the monastic systems.

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*Maitri* or *Maitrāṇīya Upaniṣad with the Commentary of Rāmatīrtha*: see Cowell 1935.

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